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SUBJECT: ADVANI MOVES UPSTAIRS, HANDS OVER REINS TO THE NEXT
GENERATION

REF: A) New Delhi 1813 B) New Delhi 1747 C) New Delhi 1329
D) New Delhi 1278

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: India's principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), implemented a generational change at the top when its leading stalwart, former Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, stepped down from his position of Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament. Along with this change, the BJP brought in a new president for the party - Nitin Gadkari - the youngest BJP president ever. These changes culminate a long and acrimonious struggle within the party after it suffered its second consecutive defeat in parliamentary elections in May 2009. The changes in the leadership of the party are aimed at giving a younger look to the party - a badly felt need in the face of the Congress Party's success at cultivating the gen-next brand in an India dominated by younger voters. The changes within the BJP also indicate the increasing hold of the RSS - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist "social" organization that is the ideological fount of the BJP. The party could again revert to a core Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) agenda and might take a more strident rightist tone in its politics and policies. While designed to address the perceived failures of the last team, the moves at the top do not by themselves tackle the deeper problems of ideological coherence and personal infighting facing the party. END SUMMARY.

Advani Hands Over to Swaraj ...

¶2. (U) On December 19, India's Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (lower house) and former Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani of the BJP stepped down from his position and handed over the reins to Sushma Swaraj. The 82-year-old Advani was elevated to the position of Chairman of the BJP's parliamentary party - a position specially created for him. Fifty-seven-year-old Deputy Leader of the Opposition Sushma Swaraj, who was named to succeed Advani as the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, became the first woman to occupy a top party leadership position.

... and Rajnath Singh to Gadkari

¶3. (U) On December 20, the BJP formally announced the name of its

new party president: Nitin Gadkari, who at 52 becomes the youngest ever president of the party. Following the party's electoral debacle in parliamentary election in May 2009, outgoing party president Rajnath Singh had announced he would not seek the post again after his three-year-term ran out in December.

Quest For a Younger Image

14. (SBU) These two changes at the top of the BJP were aimed at giving the party a much-needed younger look. Advani, who joined the RSS in 1942, was seen as a symbol of a party with an outdated agenda that was not relevant to the new India. Advani's prime ministerial aspirations were thwarted twice when the party lost successive Lok Sabha elections in 2004 and 2009. This defeat brought out sharp differences within the party culminating in mudslinging and public denouncements by its own members and senior leaders (reftels). Faced with this internal turbulence, the party's ideological fount, the RSS, decided to intervene and laid out a time table for the generational change in guard. Despite BJP and RSS claims to the contrary, most political observers believe that the changes in the BJP have been forced by the RSS.

Gadkari, an RSS Man

15. (SBU) Nitin Gadkari, who took over as the President of the BJP on December 20, is largely seen as the choice of the RSS. A politician from Nagpur (where the RSS headquarters is located), Gadkari is a Maharashtra politician with little national experience.

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Before taking over as the BJP president, Gadkari headed the Maharashtra unit of the BJP, and led it to yet another disappointing finish in the state assembly elections held in October 2009.

16. (SBU) A politician who has never won a direct election, Gadkari was a surprise choice as the BJP president. The RSS clearly wanted a young, regional leader who could focus on party building and return it to its ideological moorings based on Hindu nationalism. In that respect Nitin Gadkari fits the bill. The RSS also clearly did not want the Delhi-based non-RSS leaders whose Hindutva credential were suspect and who, in the RSS view, were responsible for the BJP's two successive electoral disasters to gain the slot.

Gadkari, the Flyover Man

17. (SBU) Known to be close to RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, Gadkari hails from a family of RSS supporters. His father was an RSS activist and Gadkari started his political career as an activist of the student wing of the RSS (ABVP -- Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad.) Born May 27, 1957, Gadkari has been a member of the Maharashtra State Legislative Council (a nominated instead of elected body) since 1989. He is best known for his tenure as the Public Works Department Minister from 1995 to 1999. During this period, he oversaw massive road construction projects in the state and came to be known as the "fly-over" man since he had initiated the construction of around 10 road overpasses (called fly-overs in India). Gadkari is married to Kanchan and the couple has two sons and a daughter.

Advani as Buffer

18. (SBU) Advani's elevation to the position of chairman of the BJP's parliamentary party is seen as a move to create a buffer between the RSS and the Advani loyalists in the party. His successor, Sushma Swaraj, and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha (upper house), Arun Jaitley, are both Advani protgs, who may need protection from the RSS from time to time. With the new party president Nitin Gadkari owing his job to the RSS, the new BJP configuration leaves outgoing party president Rajnath Singh and his followers out in the cold - a move that is likely to perpetuate factionalism within the party.

Swaraj: A Fiery Moderate

¶9. (U) Known to relish combat in parliamentary debate, Sushma Swaraj served as a Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Health and Family Welfare and Parliamentary Affairs in successive Vajpayee governments in 1996, 1998-99 and 1999-2004. She also served briefly as the Chief Minister of Delhi in 1998. She was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1996 following a full term in the Rajya Sabha (1990-96). In 1999, she lost against the Congress Party's Sonia Gandhi from the Bellary constituency in Karnataka, but secured 44.7 percent of popular vote.

¶10. (U) A lawyer by profession, and a political activist since her student days, Swaraj joined the BJP in 1984. Born on February 14, 1952, to Brahmin parents at Ambala in Haryana, Swaraj is a graduate of S.D. College, Ambala, and holds a law degree from Punjab University. As a lawyer, she defended former Defense Minister George Fernandes in the Baroda Dynamite case during the Emergency (1975-77). Her husband Swaraj Kaushal was the governor of Mizoram from 1990 to 1993, and played a significant role in negotiations for the Mizoram peace accord. Sushma Swaraj is married and has one daughter. She speaks English, Hindi and Punjabi.

Comment: Formidable Challenges for New President

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¶11. (SBU) Gadkari is little known to the BJP cadres outside of Maharashtra. In the hurly-burly of Delhi's power politics his lack of experience at the national level could come as a big handicap. Gadkari's immediate challenge will be to put together his team of office bearers keeping in mind the various power, regional and caste equations. With the results of the Jharkhand assembly elections coming out on December 23, Gadkari may also be called upon to try and work out a coalition government in that state. These challenges will be a first test of the new BJP leader's mettle.

¶12. (SBU) These are only the more immediate problems facing Gadkari. Behind these, he faces a party in disarray with six months of public and private finger pointing about the May 2009 election debacle and squabbling over party positions. In his first interaction with the media after taking over, Gadkari indicated that he would like to get back into the party fold those leaders who had been expelled from the party for various reasons. He will also need to put in place a process which seriously examines the reasons for the BJP's poor 2009 election performance and how to address the party's weaknesses. His greatest strength in these task, however, will be the unstinting support of the RSS. It could also mean more direct control by the RSS over the party - something that the BJP had tried to reduce during the Advani era. Indeed, Gadkar stressed that "cultural nationalism" (a euphemism used by the RSS to describe Hindutva) would be the inspiration for the party.

Comment: Advani Not Riding Off into the Sunset Yet

¶13. (SBU) While many have viewed his exit from the Leader of the Opposition post as the end of an era, Advani himself did not see it that way. He told reporters that he would never get off the political "chariot." Despite his up-and-down relationship over the years with the RSS, Advani is still the only BJP leader who can hold his own against them. He is unlikely to play an active role in everyday politics, but intends to remain active on the big political issues, at least for now. It is too soon to write a eulogy for the BJP's "iron man," who picked up a party that was almost extinct, built it from scratch, and led it to power in Delhi. He then watched in bewilderment as the party suffered two humiliating parliamentary election losses.

ROEMER